

## Vetting Your Vets

Finding an animal doctor for your shelter means asking all the right questions—of the potential hire, and your own organization

BY JIM BAKER



Having a vet on staff can help a shelter save more lives and adopt out more healthy animals. At the Washington Animal Rescue League, veterinarian Jan Rosen and her staff examine a dog seized from a hoarding case.

**When it came to recruiting** and hiring a new shelter veterinarian, Stephanie McDonald lucked out: She didn't even have to go looking. Like a stray kitten, a young veterinarian—Anthea Smith—showed up on the doorstep of McDonald's organization, the Edmonton Humane Society in Alberta, Canada, and expressed an interest in getting some experience in shelter medicine.

"She had graduated from school and was just trying to figure out if she wanted to go into a clinic, or if she wanted to go to a humane society," McDonald says. "Her school had encouraged students to participate and give some support to shelters

there, and so she thought it was interesting and that she would like to come to us and just try it out."

McDonald didn't offer Smith a job—not right away, at least. Instead, the shelter had her come in as a volunteer, working with its senior vet to get accustomed to the culture and see what the work entailed. It was an approach that worked, McDonald says.

"We've got her as a full-time veterinarian now, and the nice thing is she got to really learn about shelter medicine through our veterinarian of nearly 20 years, and then she really started understanding the principles effectively."

McDonald's seemingly effortless experience bringing a new veterinarian on board should probably be regarded as an outlier. (As the small-print disclaimers for diet products frequently say, "Results not typical.")

You can certainly hope that a qualified candidate who's a good fit for your organization will appear unbidden at your front door. You can hope to win the lottery, too—but you shouldn't plan on either. Hiring a veterinarian is a process that begins long before you send an offer letter—a process that ideally follows a thorough evaluation of your shelter, its needs and capabilities, and the tasks you need a vet to perform. Only then

can you figure out what kind of candidate will be the best match for your organization's work and philosophy.

Philosophical agreement is one of the key elements in finding and hiring a veterinarian for your shelter. A candidate must recognize the financial restrictions shelters face, understanding the difference between the kind of approach that works in private practice and what's necessary in a place that must address "herd health."

Shelters are a unique environment—different from working in a clinic, a public health agency, in research, or a university setting. Is the candidate a good fit? It takes a special kind of person to handle the work, and that's who shelters should set their sights on, according to Kate Hurley, a veterinarian who serves as director of the Shelter Medicine Program at University of California-Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.

"You want someone who's moving toward this for positive reasons—there are things they can see about working for a shelter that would give them joy. Because we all

know that there are challenges, and there needs to be something that keeps you coming back," she says. "Ultimately, you should look for someone who's got some spark and who understands your mission and wants to be part of it."

### Looking Inward

Hiring a vet begins with asking questions about your own organization, long before you start grilling a potential hire during the job interview. It's important for shelters to define their expectations of a new veterinarian, and to take a candid look at their operations and facilities to determine if they're able to support such a role.

Eric Anderson, animal services manager at San Luis Obispo County Animal Services in California and himself a veterinarian, suggests that your evaluation of your agency should include the following questions: What do you want to get out of having a veterinarian join your staff? Is your goal to simply improve the medical care for your animals? Or are you looking for someone to

come in and provide direction for your shelter to grow, improve, and move toward a more progressive level?

Until you've set those parameters, and assessed what you want to achieve by having a veterinarian on board, you won't be successful bringing one on, Anderson says.

"Be very clear on what you're looking for, what role the veterinarian's going to play in your management structure," says Hurley. "Do you want them to be part of the management team? Do you want them to be part of the whole decision-making process about how animals go through the shelter? Or do you want them to be focused on spay/neuter, or the medical care of animals? Do you want them to have a role in behavior evaluations?"

One issue that Anderson's seen is the expectation that a veterinarian will come in and immediately begin management of care in a shelter, when there's not support staff or diagnostic ability to perform blood work or X-rays—tests that are often needed before deciding upon a course of treatment.

## Not Enough to Go Around

### Shelters need to identify their strengths and provide perks to lure top talent

Looking to hire a shelter veterinarian? Get in line. It's a tough market, and competition among shelters is especially steep.

"We could put every veterinarian in the United States in one big football stadium, so it's not like there's that many of them, and so there's a lot of competition to hire them," says James Weedon, a veterinarian who serves as CEO of the Spay-Neuter Assistance Program (SNAP), which operates in Houston and San Antonio.

Shelters need to work to compete for talent. That means they'll have to identify the perks that make shelter positions attractive, according to Julie Levy, associate professor of small animal internal medicine at the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine.

Levy offers these suggestions:

- The majority of new veterinarians are women, and many have postponed starting families until completing veterinary school. Offering part-time or shared positions and flexible hours without emergency duty can be a lifesaver for mothers.
- Nothing can drain a new hire's enthusiasm faster than depriving her of the opportunity to practice high-quality medicine and surgery. A skilled support team is essential to assure that the veterinarian's time is used efficiently.
- Salaries must be competitive. New graduates have typically postponed employment for many years to complete their training, so they are way behind their peers in starting pension plans, acquiring a reliable vehicle, or purchasing a home.
- School debt is astronomical among new graduates, averaging \$100,000 per student and often much more. Monthly loan payments can prevent new veterinarians from embarking on the lifestyle they've dreamed of for many years, leading them to seek out higher-paying jobs. Some shelters offer to make student loan payments as long as the veterinarian works for them—a powerful incentive to stay with the organization.
- Shelter positions can offer new challenges for mid-career practitioners, who are often ready for a break from seeing clients and having emergency-call duties. A well-designed externship program for veterinary students is a great way to make a good impression and create a bond with a future veterinarian who might be recruited after graduation.

Nor should a newly hired veterinarian be expected to do every task herself. Shelters need to consider this ahead of time; if there's only enough room in their budgets for a full-time veterinarian and no vet technicians, it might make more sense to seek out a part-time veterinarian and two techs to provide support.

"You don't want your veterinarian to be down on all fours, wrestling with an animal to take a skin scraping," Hurley says. "That's not a good use of your veterinarian's time and education, and it's not a good use of your money."

Shelters also need to take a look at their facilities in order to determine what's realistically possible. In Anderson's case, his shelter was built decades ago and has no true medical facility, and that's created limitations. He and a veterinary technician simply lack the room to pursue all the treatment options they'd like to.

"I think you need to recognize that for [veterinarians] to be able to fully do their job, they need certain facilities, equipment, supplies, and workspaces, as well as the support staff that are going to assist them," he says.

### Who Does What— and Who's in Charge?

A common mistake shelters make is hiring a veterinarian without first creating a job description. This can lead to problems down the road, such as conflicts about who in your organization has the final say on medical decisions.

"An accurate job description is critical," says Jeanette O'Quin, president of the Association of Shelter Veterinarians, which has more than 700 members and 20 student chapters in the United States and Canada. "You can hire a great shelter veterinarian, but if the job is not what they expected, you may soon be hiring again."

A job description should include the work hours, qualifications, and job duties. It's also helpful to include the relative frequency of certain tasks, says O'Quin. For example, spay/neuter surgery may be part of the job, but is it something the veterinarian will be doing daily, weekly, or twice a year? A job outline will make it clear that a veterinarian should be able to meet your expectations in the prescribed time and with the available staff.

It's also important, O'Quin says, to include a description of the organization itself, explaining formal lines of authority, com-



A clear job description for a shelter veterinarian should ideally include the frequency of tasks she'll be performing. If the vet will be spending 80 percent of her time on spay/neuter surgeries, it's best to make that clear.

munication, and responsibility. Lack of clarity about who will make decisions regarding medical care and protocols can create frustration and cause veterinarians to leave their jobs at shelters. Shelters should have written policies and protocols in place, and these should be communicated to job candidates.

"That's an essential part of exploring the match during the interview process," says Julie Levy, associate professor of small animal internal medicine at the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine.

Sheltering is "a nontraditional area of practice, so there's not a well-defined role at this time for veterinarians in shelters, and there could easily be a misunderstanding about who's in charge and who's responsible for the health and welfare of the animals," Levy says.

"It's really a challenge for a veterinarian to make medical decisions on what to treat and how to treat when one day, you'll treat this condition, and another day, you don't," O'Quin says. "All of those things need to be spelled out. If everybody knows what the plan is going in, and there's good communication throughout, then that's going to be really beneficial."



Veterinarians coming to shelters from private practice need to understand that, while they will be caring for individual animals, medical care in shelters must take "herd health" into consideration and may involve some tough decisions due to limited resources.





In the hiring process, shelters need to be clear about what role the new veterinarian is going to play in the shelter's management structure and where the responsibility for major medical decisions will lie.



A shelter veterinarian will need support staff, so that she can focus on the work she's been trained for.

## Coping with Culture Shock

Having such issues explained in advance can prevent culture shock for vets coming from private clinics into the chaotic and often financially restricted world of shelter medicine.

"If you have vets that are applying coming from a clinic situation, they have to understand that most shelters have greater limitations, in terms of the ability to do a lot of diagnostics and extensive treatments and

those kinds of things," says Kim Staton, an animal welfare consultant who has worked for The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and other organizations.

It can be a big adjustment, and it's a topic that should be explored during an interview. Shelters should share their philosophy, describe their role in the community, make candidates aware of the challenges they'll face, and provide them with a mission statement.

"Doctors are trained to be healers," says Jan McHugh-Smith, CEO/president of the Humane Society of the Pike's Peak Region, in Colorado Springs, Colo. But not all shelters will be able to heal all the things that are easily treatable in private practice, and McHugh-Smith says it's smart to talk about the realities of your particular organization. An honest conversation can help you assess whether the candidate understands the challenge of limited resources, and whether he will be able to make tough decisions when necessary.

Job interviews, of course, can only reveal so much about a person. There's really no substitute for spending time with candidates, getting to know them a little better, and watching how they relate to your staff and the shelter environment—as McDonald did with the new veterinarian who's now a key part of her staff.

"There's a lot to be said for tryout periods, where maybe a veterinarian would be hired on a per-diem basis for a week or two

## Resources

Our magazine's website, [animalsheltering.org](http://animalsheltering.org) allows free job postings, and the magazine's Shelter Medicine column provides regular content for shelter veterinarians.

"Hiring a Shelter Veterinarian," by Kate Hurley, director of the Shelter Medicine Program at the University of California-Davis School of Veterinary Medicine ([sheltermedicine.com/portal/infosheets.shtml](http://sheltermedicine.com/portal/infosheets.shtml)).

"Strategies for Recruiting and Retaining Spay/Neuter Veterinarians," by James R. Weedon, CEO of the Spay-Neuter Assistance Program (SNAP) ([sheltermedicine.com/documents/strategiesforhirings-nvets.pdf](http://sheltermedicine.com/documents/strategiesforhirings-nvets.pdf)).

ASPCA Professional's webpage on shelter veterinary medicine ([aspcapro.org/shelter-veterinary-medicine.php](http://aspcapro.org/shelter-veterinary-medicine.php)).

The Association for Shelter Veterinarians has a link to job opportunities, where visitors can view available positions, or post ads for new ones ([shelternet.org](http://shelternet.org)).

to see if it's something that appeals to them," Levy says.

"Of course, it's hard to really learn everything about a job in a short time, but it certainly is very, very different from seeing owned patients one at a time. Shadowing is good, talking to staff at all levels to get a sense for what they are expecting of a veterinarian and also to learn what the morale of the shelter is."

Some shelters have externship programs for veterinary students to provide them with an opportunity to learn about shelter medicine. Such programs also give shelters a way to build relationships with students, who may decide to return after graduation—this time in search of a permanent position.

Hurley suggests that job seekers go on a ride-along with an animal control officer, watch the kennels being cleaned, spend half a day in the front office, and view the adoption process. "The shelter is a whole organism ... let the doctor get a feeling for that whole organism," she says. 